

[Anna Novak]

W3620

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

1400 Words.

Industrial Lore

[May ? 193?]

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

ADDRESS 1339 South Troy Street

DATE May 1, 1939

SUBJECT Work history back of the yards

1. Date and time of interview - April 25 - 27

Library of Congress

2. Place of interview - Home of worker

3. Name and address of informant -(Mrs.) Anna Novak Address withheld

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

None

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

None

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Four very small rooms in back of a store, reached by board walk. Stove heat, no bath, no pantry, kitchen table must be moved every time anyone enters back door and adults literally have to squeeze past, flattened against the walls. Kitchen like a closet, low ceiling. House is partitioned, another family living in three side rooms. Sharing toilet. When radio is turned on, as it is during all the 'Polish hours', the Novak family hear it as plainly as if it more in their own home. Anna says it drives her batty, coming home tired and then having her housework to do and their katinka banging away, splitting her head in two. She wouldn't mention this to her neighbors, being on good terms with them and besides, under the circumstances, she doesn't think she has a right to expect them to deny themselves the pleasure of their own radio just because the walls are thin.

FORM B

Personal History of Informant

CHICAGO

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

Library of Congress

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

ADDRESS 1339 South Troy Street

DATE May 1, 1939

SUBJECT Packing house worker

NAME OF INFORMANT Anna Novak

1. Ancestry - Polish, American born
2. Place and date of birth - Wisconsin - about 30 years of age
3. Family - - Married, husband and two children, boys, 10 and 13 years old.
4. Places lived in, with dates -

Grew up in an orphanage in Wisconsin. Came to Chicago, lived near or back of the yards since, 14 years.

5. Education, with dates-

Eighth grade and one half year high in St. Hedwig's Orphanages.

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates -

Worked in the canning rooms most of the time in the yards.

7. Special skills and interests -

Likes her union work. Is the shop steward.

Library of Congress

8. community and religious activities -

Belongs to a neighborhood YWCA center. Good Catholic, but criticizes various aspects and activities of the church's [freely?], probably due to husband's influence, his cynical attitude, and his advanced political views.

9. Description of informant -

Medium blonde, bright blue eyes, big and healthy, absolutely overflowing with life. Irrepressible and fearless in defense of her union, at work or wherever she goes. Sociable and just generally a happy kind of person.

10. (Other Points gained in interview)

Brings her boys with her to every party she attends. Very proud of her two boys. Hates her crowded home and would consider government housing projects in the yards area a godsend to her family life but thinks the local politicians in the neighborhood have control of real estate there to such [????]

FORM C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

Library of Congress

ADDRESS 1339 South Troy Street

DATE May 2, 1939

SUBJECT Packing house worker

NAME OF INFORMANT Anna Novak

I've had eight years of the yards. It's a lot different now, with the union and all. We used to have to buy the foremen presents, you know. On all the holidays, Xmas, Easter, Holy Week, Good Friday, you'd see the men coming to work with hip pockets bulging and take the foremen off in corners, handing over their half pints. They sure would lay for you if you forgot their whiskey, too. Your job wasn't worth much if you didn't observe the holiday 'customs'. The women had to bring 'em bottles, just the same as the men. You could get along swell if you let the boss slap you on the behind and feel you up. God, I hate that stuff, you don't know! I'd rather any place but in the stockyards just for that reason alone. I tried to get out a couple of times. Went to work for Container Corp.(box factory near the yards). Used to swing a hammer on those big wooden boxes. Look at my hands, now. (Her hands are misshapen; blunted, thickened fingers and calloused at every joint.) My husband wouldn't let me keep on there, it got to be too much for me to handle. I had to have work so I went back to the yards. I worked in the canning rooms and in sausage packing at Armour's. My God, the canning rooms! In summer time they're full of damp and steam so dense it's like a heavy fog and you can't breathe, and in

FORM D

Extra Comment

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FOLKLORE

Library of Congress

CHICAGO

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

ADDRESS 1339 South Troy Street

DATE May 2, 1939

SUBJECT Packing house worker

NAME OF INFORMANT Anna Novak

winter the steam penetrates your clothes and turns cold and clammy on your skin, your hands and feet simply freeze. When the union came they made me steward of the girls in my department. Then they started laying me off, because we were getting somewhere with the union, see, and they thought they'd scare me, so they layed me off a couple of times and broke up my seniority that way. Then after I got through testifying at the National Labor Relations Board they layed me off for good. I used to come up to 'Old Lady' McCann, she hires all the women for Armour's, and I used to ask her why I couldn't get back. I'd say, 'Haven't I always done good work, haven't I been a steady worker?' And she'd say, 'Yes, Anna, you're a good worker, and an experienced girl, but you see now that your seniority is broken I can't do anything for you.' And all the time I'd be sitting there talking to her I'd know she was giving me the horse laugh. That dame got many a shiner from girls for her mean tricks. There was a time when she couldn't step out of her office without an escort because girls and women she'd laid off would wait for her right outside. I mean hundreds of them. I'm tellin' you, when McCann would come around and the girls at work got 3 a load of her and her latest shiner, they would feel ten times better all day. It would be a picnic. Everybody has it in for her, because they all know what it's like to go

Library of Congress

through her mill. But she's God Almighty as far as Armour's is concerned, when it comes to getting work. No woman gets in or out of Armour's without her say so.

Here's one thing the union changed while I was in Armour's. Like the white girls in Armour's if they work 15 years they have some kind of honor system and they usually get better work. A little easier job, you know. What do you think they give the colored girls who work that long? They give them a black star, pasted on their time cards! They hardly ever get a chance at anything but the dirtiest, wettest jobs, that even the white men can't stand or just wouldn't take. And then that star business is such an easy way for the bosses to spot the colored women so that they won't accidentally give a good job to one, in some emergency. The union is putting the heat on that particular practice. The colored girls come into the union easy, and at union meetings you'd be surprised now they stand up and have their their say. The Polish girls and the [Lithuanians?] they're the hardest to get in. You know how it is. There'll be a bunch of Polish and a bunch of Liths working and the foreman will play them against each other and they'll fall for that stuff. They'll be so busy calling each other names, lousy Lugans or dumb Polacks, that when the time comes to get together, they can't, they're so used to fighting. The big reason though is that they're ruled by the priests and the priests, lots of them, say, 'The CIO is against religion and the church!' They 4 tell the Polish women, 'You have no business going to union meetings, you should stay home and be concerned with raising a family of good Catholics.' Around here they always yell about the married couples who have no children. They don't want to give them absolution. Raise children, raise children, raise children, that's all they know. But how to feed the children, that they don't know. I have a time down at work with some of the women, especially the older ones. They'll say, 'If God wants me to be happy, I'll be happy, if He wants me to be laid off, it's His will, and I must accept it and not doubt Him! I'll say, 'Listen, don't you blame God for everything! Just because you're afraid to join the union and do something to keep your job safe and your children fed decently don't throw it on God!'

Library of Congress

You should see, sometimes I'll be up early in the morning, and just sit down at the window, you know, and watch old ladies, 70 years old and more, going to work in the yards, so bent over and shriveled up and sick it makes you want to cry just watching them, such old, tired women, grandmothers most of them. The bosses make it so miserable for them, too. They should give them the easier jobs, at least, of not a pension for them after they get so old. Instead, they'll set an old woman to work at a high truck and have her bending over, taking heavy cans out of it, all day long. You know that's too hard for old women like that, they'll be so gray in the face after a day's work, almost dead looking. Poor old ladies, they have to sit down there on the floor and rest for half an hour after work before they have the strength to get up and go home at night. Sometimes some 5 of us change jobs with them for a while if the foremen aren't around, but when they catch us we get bawled out. They want to make the old ladies quit, see.

I've been working at Agar's for eight months now, since Armour's put me on the blacklist. Our contract expires in July, our union contract and we're negotiating for another one with them now. I was appointed steward by the union but when we get our contract we'll elect our stewards by union membership vote. Agar's isn't so bad now. Half the plant was organized before I got my job there, but did we have to crawl to get the others in. Now what we want is a good contract, and if they won't bargain, all we need to do is tie up the [killing?] floor and the order department and Agar's will close up tighter than a [?] clam. They can't afford that. And we've got the plant with us solid.

One thing, you should see the rash the girls get, those that have to handle poisoned pork. And the acids from cans, it just gets you so that you can't stand up. You don't know what's the matter with you but work you can't to save your life. Then it's so easy to catch cold, one girl working right next to another coughs and you know she can't turn around, she's got production to make on a line, and there you are. The whole table of girls will be coughing and sneezing over their work. A girl can't take time off on account of a cold, the company wouldn't let them and they can't lose all that pay, anyway. Another thing, in our

Library of Congress

department we have two toilets for 100 people, girls. You should see before we got the union, you could scrape the muck off the floor with a knife. We made them put in a new floor and they promised to give us some new lockers, so far there are 30 lockers for 100 girls. Well, we're on their necks all the time, now. When we want to eat we've got to go over by the lockers and they're right on top of these two stinking toilets. If you knew the smell! And girls have to eat there! I wouldn't have lunch there if I had to walk four miles for a cup of coffee! You can't imagine what the combination of toilets and disinfectant and cigarette smoke and sweat and stockyards smells like! When we kick about things like that and we talk about the union we make the boss mad. When he gets good and mad and he knows he can't stop us from talking, he hollers, 'Every dog gets his day and when I get mine!' And we just laugh and say, 'Oh, the 'dogs' have their day now, you had yours 10 years ago, before the union came.' Does he get sore!

In the departments where there's that salt water on the floors, every month it would do for a pair of shoes. It eats the leather out, you know. We got after the government inspectors and the company, and the union made them keep sawdust on the floors after that.

Once I was working nights and it was one minute to eleven. We are supposed to start at eleven and the girl next to me was waiting, and she had her thumb in the dry cornmeal machine bin, picking at something. At the other end of the room was the girl who turned on the machinery switch when it was time to start. Well, that lousy foreman we had, thought he'd rush work, and so he came up to the machine starter and hollered 'Alright, shake your fannies! It's eleven o'clock! She pressed the switch, and this other girl at the end of the room screamed - - her thumb was cut 7 clean off. Because of a man so eager to push company production that observing safety restrictions meant nothing to him if he could manage to chisel even a minute of the girls' time without having to pay them for it. It's things like that the union is here to prevent from happening, and to see that when some worker does meet such an accident she won't be thrown out on the dump heap, maimed

Library of Congress

and thrown a little compensation [sop?] that wouldn't last a year. The companies can't get away with that anymore. People know more.